

writers and critics contend. On the contrary, I find the social and political very much intact in their work despite the complexity of their discourse and methods. What is at issue in this chapter is the way Baker and Gates have attempted a re-evaluation of the values that subtend African-American literature through a wholesale appropriation of theories and concepts from the very systems against which they claim to be working. I feel that these writers' theoretical claims are extensive. They each seek a new way of apprehending the being of black literature. But what they have in effect offered, despite the critics who rail against them, are interesting literary histories that have indeed shaken, but have not upset, the status quo. It is my hope that this study will help to enrich the multiplicity of the debate so that the being of literary blackness will perhaps emerge on its own.

In "Toward a Conclusion" I reflect on the concept of double-consciousness and its implications for a thoroughly modern black literature. I also raise the question of what (black) literary theory reveals or conceals about reading and writing—indeed—about the being of (black) literature itself.

## I *The Souls of Black Folk:* Reading Across the Color Line

I reached up and took out a fat black book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. I turned the pages. It spoke about a people in a valley. And they were black, and dispossessed, and denied. I skimmed through the pages, anxious to take it all in.

—Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*

W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is, for many writers and critics throughout the African diaspora, an instituting text for twentieth-century black literature written in English.<sup>1</sup> Politically and ideologically framed by what Du Bois perceived as the problem of the twentieth century—the problem of the color line—it posits a founding metaphor, that of the Veil, and a founding concept, *double-consciousness*, for an ontology of blackness upon which is grounded the Black American literary tradition. *The Souls of Black Folk* also posits an aesthetic that has greatly defined the parameters of the tradition. It is, as Robert B. Stepto writes in *From Behind the Veil*, "the first substantial immersion narrative in the tradition; with its publication, all of the prefiguring forms and tropes that will develop another literary period are finally on display."<sup>2</sup> It contrasts with the other works included in Stepto's typology of African-American narratives in that it is Du Bois rather than some external (white) voice who assumes responsibility for "authenticating" his tale.<sup>3</sup>

Stepto describes this process of authentication in narratives before *The Souls of Black Folk* as being "based at least as much on race as on fact"; that is, it was generally a white person who confirmed, in writing, that a narrative's questing heroic figure "was where he said he was." He writes that in *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois changes the process by assuming responsibility for authenticating his text and his existence. Moreover, his narrative "advances a new scientific standard for what constitutes authenticating evidence." It scientifically gathers empirical evidence from such literal and

figurative fields as the Southern Black Belt to complete the authenticating tasks that were previously given over to white public opinion (Stepito 63).

Du Bois claims responsibility for *The Souls of Black Folk* in "The Forethought" when he appeals to his "Gentle Reader" to "receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there."<sup>4</sup> But what Stepito fails to see, and this is a major flaw in *From Behind the Veil*, is that this kind of documentation or attestation does not imply what he feels is authorial control of the text. Du Bois is in control of the text only to the extent that he *does* develop a strategy for his writing: writing requires a strategy; he *does* order his writing in a certain way; he lays out the text's structure in "The Forethought." But the counterpart to writing is reading, and since reading and writing are events occurring in language they cannot be controlled. Language itself is uncontrollable. We cannot control language. If anything, it may control us. The history of the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States is replete with examples to support the Heideggerian claim that "language . . . leaves itself to our mere willing and cultivating as an instrument of domination over beings."<sup>5</sup>

Stepito's definition of *The Souls of Black Folk* as the "first substantial immersion narrative in the tradition" refers specifically to the African-American protagonist's "ritualized journey into a symbolic South." However, in my reading of the text, I will disclose that the writing *exceeds* the parameters of the tradition as it is defined by Stepito. *The Souls of Black Folk* is equally immersed in the European (German Idealism) and American philosophical traditions. This immersion is announced by the title of the first chapter: "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." The chapter itself is a revision of an 1897 *Atlantic Monthly* magazine article that Du Bois published under the title, "Strivings of the Negro People."

While "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" might very well make more pronounced Du Bois's racial self-identification than the more "detached" original title as Stepito contends,<sup>6</sup> this new title also invokes the philosophical systems of Herder, Fichte, and particularly Hegel. Considering the fact that Du Bois studied with William James and Josiah Royce at Harvard<sup>7</sup> and with Heinrich von Treitschke at the University of Berlin (which was in the midst of a "Hegelian revival" when he arrived), it is reasonable to assume that, like most late nineteenth-century New England intellectuals, Du Bois would have been fairly well acquainted with Hegel's major philosophical texts. (In fact, Du Bois makes specific

references to Hegel and Hegelianism in Lectures XX, XXXI, XXXIX and the final lecture of his Philosophy IV notebook.<sup>8</sup>) The chapter itself, as Joel Williamson points out in "W. E. B. Du Bois as a Hegelian," is laden with words that were favored by Hegel. Words such as *consciousness*, *double-consciousness*, *strife*, *self*, and *spirit* all point to a Hegelian metaphysics of the self.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, through his very influential, and very Hegelian, formulation of the notion of *double-consciousness*, Du Bois inscribes himself—and the African-American literary tradition—into the discourses of Western European philosophy. He writes,

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (17)

This very famous passage also demonstrates that Du Bois contextualizes the particular—the sociological and psychological ramifications of American racism on Black Americans—in familiar Western universals. What Stepito refers to as his "sustained evocation of the spiritual world of a race" arises out of the language of metaphysics (Stepito 66). And with that evocation arises a philosophical problematic: that of the existence of consciousness itself.

By 1904 William James, whom Du Bois acknowledges as his "friend and guide to clear thinking,"<sup>10</sup> had begun to seriously question whether consciousness could exist once Kant, with his "transcendental ego," had undermined the soul and thrown off balance its bipolar relation with the body. In "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" James argues that in rational and empiricist quarters alike, the spiritual principle of these "equipollent" or equivalent substances "attenuates itself to a thoroughly ghostly condition, being only a name for the fact that the 'content' of experi-

ence is known. It loses personal form and activity—these passing over to the content—and becomes a bare *Bewusstheit* [awareness] or *Bewusstsein überhaupt*, [consciousness in general] of which in its own right absolutely nothing can be said.” James calls this condition an “estate of pure diaphaneity” or transparency. It marks the point at which consciousness risks disappearing altogether except as the name of a nonentity. Consequently, James, who admits his twenty-year distrust of it, refuses to grant consciousness a place among philosophical first principles. He also accuses those who are unwilling to abandon it for the more current notion of absolute experience of “clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing ‘soul’ upon the air of philosophy” and calls for it to be “openly and universally discarded”: “For twenty years past I have mistrusted ‘consciousness’ as an entity; for seven or eight years past I have suggested its non-existence to my students, and tried to give them its pragmatic equivalent in realities of experience. It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded.”<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, by the time James got around to trying to persuade his students that consciousness did not exist, Du Bois had moved on. Had he been among a later group of students, Du Bois might have hesitated to use what had become, at least for James, a contentious concept for his eloquent philosophical reflection on one of the *effects* of the problem of the color line: that “peculiar sensation” of being caught up in an interminable dualism between the subject and the object, the body and the soul. In any event, since James insists that consciousness stands as a function for knowing rather than a quality of being, it is to Hegel and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that we must turn in order to more fully apprehend the philosophical implications of Du Bois’s “double-consciousness.” But before we proceed, it is worth noting that, in “Hegel and His Method,” James comments on what is a major obstacle for anyone who tries to explain Hegel: his “perverse preference for the use of technical and logical jargon” and a style of writing that obscures his otherwise easy to grasp central vision or thought.

But if Hegel’s central thought is easy to catch, his abominable habits of speech make his application of it to details exceedingly difficult to follow. His passion for the slipshod in the way of sentences, his unprincipled playing fast and loose with terms; his dreadful vocabulary, calling what completes a thing its ‘negation,’ for example; his systematic refusal to let you know whether he is talking logic or physics or

psychology, his whole deliberately adopted policy of ambiguity and vagueness, in short: all these things make his present-day readers wish to tear their hair—or his—out in desperation.<sup>12</sup>

Keeping James’s warning of what lies ahead in mind, I hope to spare us from any unnecessary tearing of hair (and gnashing of teeth) by simplifying Hegel’s thought as much as I dare. Also, at certain crucial points in my summary, I have quoted rather than paraphrased because, like William James, I am aware that “the only thing that is certain is that whatever you may say of [Hegel’s] procedure, some one will accuse you of misunderstanding it.”<sup>13</sup>



For Hegel, consciousness is “explicitly the *notion* of itself. Hence it is something that goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself.”<sup>14</sup> His *Phenomenology of Spirit* charts the “succession of experiences through which consciousness passes” as it progresses toward and transcends its own limits (55). Those experiences include consciousness as perception, as sense-certainty, as understanding, and as self-consciousness. Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness seems to correspond to this latter experience, to consciousness as self-consciousness.

In the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Self-Consciousness,” Hegel discloses the doubleness or duality of consciousness *in itself*. This doubleness occurs in two *distinct moments*. In the principle *distinct moment* consciousness is self-consciousness as otherness, an *immediately superseded* difference which, however, *is not*. It does not have the form of *being*, but rather that of a *being*. In the second *distinct moment* consciousness unites with this difference in the following manner:

With that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of *consciousness*, and the whole expanse of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time only as connected with the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself; and hence the sensuous world is for it an enduring existence which, however, is only *appearance*, or a difference which, *in itself*, is no difference. This antithesis of its appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness, i.e., self-consciousness is *Desire* in general. Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object:

one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which however *for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative* and the second, viz. *itself* which is the true *essence*, and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object. (105)

Philosophically, then, what Du Bois argues is being denied blacks, "true self-consciousness," is *in itself* double-consciousness. As such, it is both in a unity with and in opposition to consciousness. However, this mode of consciousness as self-consciousness is only one instance of the doubling of consciousness. The other instances occur in what Hegel refers to as the "lordship and bondage" relationship and in the "Unhappy Consciousness."

Hegel's lordship and bondage relationship provided an important paradigm for many of the pro-abolitionist debates of the St. Louis Hegelians, a group of immigrant German intellectuals who helped to introduce German philosophy into New England Transcendentalism.<sup>15</sup> In the "lordship and bondage" relationship, self-consciousness is both independent of and dependent on an *other*. It exists as self-consciousness only insofar as it is acknowledged as such by another self-consciousness which it must supersede. Only through this supersession of the other, of the independent being, can it "become certain of itself as the essential being; . . . in so doing it proceeds to supersede its *own* self, for this other is itself" (111). This process of the supersession of the "ambiguous otherness" and the returning *into itself* of self-consciousness which, according to Hegel, "has been represented as the action of *one* self-consciousness," has

the double significance of being both its own action and the action of the other as well. For the other is equally independent and self-contained, and there is nothing in it of which it is not itself the origin. The first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it. Thus the movement is simply the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought by both. (112)

But these two sides are not equal. They are, in fact, opposed to each other since one side is only *recognized* while the other is only *recognizing*. Consequently, the essence and absolute object of self-consciousness, the 'I' or individual, is in conflict with another individual, or "unessential, negatively characterized object" (113). The conflict arises over the question of the "truth of self-certainty" which, as we shall see, Du Bois raises in the chapter on Alexander Crummell. For Hegel, each individual is

certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty still has no truth. For it would have truth only if its own being-for-self had confronted it as an independent object, or, what is the same thing, if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty. But according to the Notion of recognition that is possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it, only when each in its own self through its own action, and again through the action of the other, achieves this pure abstraction of being-for-self. (113)

With the truth of self-certainty at stake, the two self-consciousnesses enter into a "life-and-death" struggle with each other. Each individual self-consciousness must struggle to rid itself of its "self-externality" or otherness; for it is only through such a struggle that their "certainty of being *for themselves*" can be raised to truth (114). However, since life is the "natural setting of consciousness," and death is the natural negation of it, the truth that is supposed to issue from this "life and death struggle" is negated by it. What emerges instead is an independent (lord) and a dependent (bondsmen) consciousness.

The relationship between the lord and the bondsmen is mediated by things. It is the lord's desire for the thing that makes the bondsmen dependent on him, for the bondsmen is the one who forms and gives permanence to it. In so doing, he also realizes himself as an "alienated existence" whose *being-for-self* is actualized only through the thing and the work he performs on it. His is, therefore, a servile consciousness and not yet a true self-consciousness since the lord is its essential reality. Only when the two "moments" of fear and service conjoin with his "*formative activity*" does the bondsmen's consciousness become a consciousness of itself as an essential being, "a being which *thinks* or is a free self-consciousness," and not something external to it (120).

This free and thinking self-consciousness sees itself as a being that *thinks* and holds something to be essentially important, or true and good

only insofar as it *thinks* it to be such. It is, therefore, the consciousness of Stoicism, a thinking reality whose "aim is to be free, and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence, alike from being active as passive, into the simple essentiality of thought" (121). What it cannot withdraw from, however, is its otherness which manifests itself as Scepticism, a philosophical concept that gets considerable attention in the first five lectures of Du Bois's philosophy notebook.

It is in Scepticism that consciousness gets to know itself as a dual or double-consciousness, a consciousness containing contradiction within itself. This consciousness contrasts with the consciousness of Stoicism in that it negates the other consciousness even as it realizes it as one of its two modes of self-consciousness. Hegel describes this process of negation in the following passage:

In Stoicism, self-consciousness is the simple freedom of itself. In Scepticism, this freedom becomes a reality, negates the other side of determinate existence, but really duplicates *itself*, and now knows itself to be a duality. Consequently, the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one. The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet in its unity: the *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being. (126)

Contradictoriness is therefore the essence of the unhappy consciousness. It is essentially a consciousness "divided and at variance with itself," yet it is always striving for a reconciliation of the very elements that constitute its essence. Hegel continues:

This *unhappy, inwardly disrupted* consciousness, since its essentially contradictory nature is for it a *single* consciousness, must for ever have present in the one consciousness the other also; and thus it is driven out of each in turn in the very moment when it imagines it has successfully attained to a peaceful unity with the other. Its true return into itself, or its reconciliation with itself will, however, display the Notion of Spirit that has become a living Spirit, and has achieved an actual existence, because it already possesses as a single undivided consciousness a dual nature. The Unhappy Consciousness itself is the gazing of one self-consciousness into another, and itself is both, and the unity

of both is also its essential nature. But it is not as yet explicitly aware that this is its essential nature, or that it is the unity of both. (126)

Du Bois's "double-consciousness" decontextualizes Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness." That is, it creates a rupture between this particular technical term or "sign" and its historical and traditional context—German Idealism in all of its manifestations—and opens it up to other contexts. In this case, the new context is one upon which is inscribed the problem of the twentieth century: the problem of the color line. Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness" is therefore *re*-contextualized into a problematic that is sociological, psychological, and philosophical, since, according to Hegel, consciousness, if it exists at all, is always a double-consciousness. It is always seeking to reconcile itself with its Other. It is always striving for "true self-consciousness." Therefore, in this philosophical paradigm, the Otherness with which the Negro seeks to reconcile himself is one of the elements that constitutes his essence as a social and psychological being. As the hyphenated nomenclature *African-American* implies, one of the Negro's two points of reference is America. The Negro, Black American, Afro-American, African-American is an American. As such, the "other world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" is, in fact, the Negro's world. And the irreconcilability of the Negro with that world is an essential part of the Negro's being-in-the-world.



While "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" is sociological, psychological, and philosophical (it implicitly invokes the philosophers and systems whose propositions form the structure of all of modern Western philosophy and its presuppositions), the second, third, fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk* tend toward a sociological investigation of the problem of the color line and its attendant problems, that is, Reconstruction, "Negro" leadership (chapter 3 is a critique of Booker T. Washington) and the education and training of black youth. In these chapters Du Bois lays out the scientifically gathered "empirical evidence" that Stepto claims constitutes a "new narrative mode and form." In chapter 6, for example, Du Bois responds to critics of higher education for blacks by presenting data from an Atlanta University survey about the more than 2500 blacks who by 1900 had earned Bachelor's degrees. About two-thirds of the graduates contacted responded to the survey. Over 53 percent of them indicated that they had pursued careers in education; 17 percent

were theologians; another 17 percent were physicians or other "professionals;" 6 percent were merchants, farmers, and artisans; and 4 percent were employed in the government civil service (83). This evidence proved that, given the opportunity, blacks could "receive that higher training, the end of which is culture," and make significant contributions to the development of American civilization. And it is in the interest of culture that Du Bois asks, "What place in the future development of the South ought the Negro College and college-bred man to occupy" (84)?

Du Bois insists that technical and vocational training, while certainly necessary in a highly industrialized society, are not enough. They do not reach deeply enough into the "foundations of knowledge" and therefore cannot provide the kind of training and culture necessary to develop thinking men. One of Du Bois's two imperatives for the Negro College is that it "must develop men." The other imperative, stated less explicitly, has to do with the soul: "there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds, and if we be not wholly bewitched by our Rhinegold, they shall again" (87).

This second imperative echoes the German Idealist notion of the sovereignty of the human soul, and the Socratic ethical challenge to *know thyself*. Du Bois repeats this ethical challenge when he writes in "Of Alexander Crummell," "This is the history of a human heart, — the tale of a black boy who many long years ago began to struggle with life that he might know the world and know himself" (157). He also posits an Arnoldian concept of culture by calling for the development of great (black) men of culture who will prevail over and make current everywhere "the best that has been thought and known in the world."<sup>16</sup> Du Bois's imperatives are therefore moral and ethical. As such, they cannot *exceed* the discourse of metaphysics. Instead they combine with his empiricism to produce what Robert Stepto calls the "scholarly narrative posture or radical of presentation" that completes his "self-initiated authentication" (Stepto 63).

As a mode of authenticating or interpreting one's existence, this narrative posture must operate in what philosophy calls the "fore-structure" of understanding. It must proceed from a prior understanding of the world and what it means to be-in-the-world since, according to Martin Heidegger, "any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted."<sup>17</sup> The movement

of understanding and interpretation/authentication that structures Du Bois's "scholarly narrative posture" as Stepto describes it, is circular. Its circular movement traps Du Bois within the philosophical hermeneutic circle. However, as Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it the right way," for hidden in the hermeneutic circle is "a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing."<sup>18</sup>

What Du Bois seems to want to uncover from beneath the deep structures of racial oppression is the possibility for this kind of knowing. The desire for this "most primordial kind of knowing" sends Du Bois and his "weary travelers," Alexander Crummell in chapter 12, and John Jones in chapter 13, deep into the Southern Black Belt.

Du Bois develops his own Black Belt experiences in the fourth and seventh chapters. But while one is a slightly veiled autobiographical sketch, the other is characteristic of what Stepto refers to as an "immersion narrative." It records a mythical journey deep into the recesses of the Black Belt and into a historical epoch marked by two events: the great world-wide demand for cotton, and the systematic enslavement and exploitation of several millions of black people.

"Of the Black Belt" reverses one of the dominant themes of early African-American literature: the symbolic journey to the North and to freedom. This descent into the Black Belt *describes* a symbolic space that would later become very important for writers like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison, among others. It is the Deep South after Emancipation — Albany, Georgia: a transitional society, a degenerating society — where Cotton was once king. Debt is now King Cotton's successor, for the booming cotton industry of the 1850s became a financial disaster in the 1880s; and where there was once opulence there now stands poverty and decay.

As our voyager makes his way through the Black Belt he observes that

wherever the King may be, the parks and palaces of the Cotton Kingdom have not wholly disappeared. We plunge even now into great groves of oak and towering pine, with an undergrowth of myrtle and shrubbery. This was the "home-house" of the Thompsons, — slavebarons who drove their coach and four in the merry past. All is silence now, and ashes, and tangled weeds. The owner put his whole fortune into the rising cotton industry of the fifties, and with the falling prices of the eighties he packed up and stole away. Yonder is another grove,

with unkempt lawn, great magnolias, and grassgrown paths. The Big House stands in half-ruin, its great front door staring blankly at the street, and the back part grotesquely restored for its black tenant. A shabby, well-built Negro he is, unlucky and irresolute. He digs hard to pay rent to the white girl who owns the remnant of the place. She married a policeman, and lives in Savannah. (93)

Through the use of metaphor, which for Derrida is a "classic philosopheme, a metaphysical concept," Du Bois "negates" the *un-sayable* history of chattel slavery. In its place are *figured* the metaphors King/palace/Cotton Kingdom. These metaphors are "symmetrically opposed" to the properties that constitute the empirical reality of the slave system: Master/slave/slave-plantation.<sup>19</sup> Slavery is figured, or brought into presence, through the image of an aristocracy in decline. But that presence is only glimpsed. It is partially *veiled* by Du Bois's rhetoric which must rely on a "classical Aristotelian metaphor by analogy" in order to articulate the realities of a burgeoning industrial world.

In the preface to the 1953 Jubilee edition of his text, Du Bois makes the important point that when he wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, he had not yet realized the influence of Freud or Marx, whose impact on the modern world he calls "tremendous." Therefore, in order to adequately represent the structures of the institution of slavery, he had no recourse but to draw analogies between it and the European aristocracy. But, in the interest of literariness, this analogy distorts the historical facts of slavery. Cotton is *not* king; slaveowners are *not* "barons"; and the cotton-growing South is *not* a kingdom. What is brought more clearly into presence is the fact that slavery has yielded to another form of labor: that of the black tenant farmer which, in many respects, is nothing more than slavery under a different guise since the tenant is perpetually indebted to his white landlord/lady. From one farm to another the situation is virtually the same. The black farmers can barely eke out a living for themselves. Those who do manage to see a profit are regularly cheated out of it. It is no wonder, then, that the blacks who greet the traveler form a composite picture whose dominating feature is despair.

Yet it is in this black peasantry, totally disenfranchised, that Du Bois believes the *spirit* of (Afro) American culture resides. This premise strongly influenced the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement and is, like the notion of double-consciousness, grounded in German Idealism.<sup>20</sup> Du Bois reiterates Herder, whose writings on the

German folksong (Volkslieder) not only influenced the internationalistic trend of the German folklore movement of the nineteenth century but also contributed to the building of a national German literature.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the title of Du Bois's text itself, *The Souls of Black Folk*, re-marks and reiterates the two concepts—soul and folk—(Volk) that are central, not only to Herder's aesthetics, but to that of Hegel as well.<sup>22</sup>

Like Hegel, Du Bois sees the (black) "peasant" or slave in a relationship with nature that has been left intact by industrialism. He writes that "like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Nature's heart" (186). In Hegelian terms, the slave shared with other peasant cultures a trust that "what it has put into the ground will come up of itself."<sup>23</sup> As the provider of crude labor, this peasant culture is likewise the locus of the Absolute trust that the state requires. And since this culture is not required to bring understanding into play with the command to provide crude labor, understanding is similarly brought into play in another domain: that of the harvest festivities, the folk songs, maxims, and lore it uses to sustain itself against the force that commands it to provide and to which it must obey.<sup>24</sup> Following Herder, Du Bois argues that this music, poetry, and dance unite a nation's folk-heritage and is the bulwark of nationalism. But for Du Bois, the music, poetry, and dance of the black folk are of great political and social significance. They challenge the popular belief that blacks have contributed nothing to the development of American culture. Du Bois urges black and white writers alike to preserve this folk heritage by working it into the structure of the nation's imaginative literature.

Aside from the harvest festivities, folk songs, maxims and lore that constitute the domain for understanding to be brought into play by the (black) peasantry, there is yet another domain: that of religion, or Christianity. This domain has perhaps more directly and profoundly influenced the development of a unique black folk culture than any other. In chapter 10 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses the role of religion, identifying three characteristics that typify the "religion of the slave": 1) the preacher, whom he calls the "most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil"; 2) the music (which he discusses in greater detail in chapter 14); and 3) the frenzy which varies in expression "from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms" (141). Indeed, this "scene of human passion" and complete abandon is central to black folk culture. It is also arguably the least eurocentric domain of the culture. Traces of Africa are

strongly inscribed upon this ritual of the Southern Baptist folk religion. And with the exception of death, it is the only instance that opens itself up to the possibility for transcendence, which is what the black "peasants" seek through their participation in the ritual: to somehow transcend the narrow and racially drawn confines of their (worldly) existence.

Death and transcendence are the "themes" of chapters 11 and 12. In chapter 11 Du Bois employs the language and rhetoric of romanticism to eulogize the death of his first-born child. Born within the shadow of the Veil, the child is destined to live a "living death." But Death—the "wraith of Life"—"jealously" intervenes, leaving the grieving father to wonder why he has been deprived of his "one little coign of happiness" within the shadow of the Veil:

I am no coward, to shrink before the rugged rush of the storm, nor even to quail before the awful shadow of the Veil. But hearken, O Death! Is not this my life hard enough,—is not that dull land that stretches its sneering web about me cold enough,—is not all the world beyond these four little walls pitiless enough, but that thou must needs enter here,—thou, O Death? About my head the thundering storm beat like a heartless voice, and the crazy forest pulsed with the curses of the weak; but what cared I, within my home beside my wife and baby boy? Wast thou so jealous of one little coign of happiness that thou must needs enter there,—thou, O Death? (154–55)

But it is through death that the child transcends the world within the shadow of the Veil. In death the child, "if he still be," dwells "above the Veil."

Alexander Crummell, whom Du Bois eulogizes in chapter 12, also dwells above the Veil; but his mode of transcendence is based on knowing. Crummell exemplifies Du Bois's ideal of "book-learning" as the path "leading to heights high enough to overlook life" (19). However, this path is not without its racially inspired obstacles. The first abolition school Crummell attends is demolished by irate farmers; the theological seminary to which he applies refuses to accept 'Negroes'; and when he finally gets his own chapel, lack of participation among his black parishioners forces him to close. But Crummell strives on. Guided by the ethical challenge to "know thyself," Crummell desires to pass beyond the limits of "book-learning" into the realm of the knowable in order to ground for himself his own *self-certitude*. Crummell (and perhaps Du Bois), is therefore also guided by the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum*.

The "hero" of chapter 13 is the antithesis of Alexander Crummell, yet he is guided by the same desire to know. Du Bois describes the "fictional" John Jones as a young man who spent his time "peering through and beyond the world of men into a world of thought" (169). His mode of thinking, however, is initially epistemological: why is a circle not square; why does this Greek word mean this and not that, and so on? What he learns is that there is no relation between this kind of knowledge—academic literacy—and freedom. The myth of the quest for literacy and freedom is nothing more than a myth for John Jones. After having spent seven years in his "queer thought-world," and having completed the symbolic journey to the North and the mythic freedom of the "World" of New York City, Jones returns to his native Altamaha only to find social conditions there intolerable. The white world insists that he conform to their codes of decorum and deference. The black world urges him to obey. And they both agree that the good boy, the "fine-plough" hand who was "handy everywhere and always good-natured and respectful" had been ruined (167). His death by a lynch mob is therefore the inevitable outcome of an aborted journey through literacy to freedom.

What remains "unspoken" in this and in chapter 12 is that both Crummell and Jones (and perhaps Du Bois) seek to move beyond the realm of finite knowledge and into that of infinite knowledge. The striving for this kind of knowing is, for Du Bois, characteristic of an epoch in which philosophy seemed to suddenly bring into sharp focus the dichotomy between the subject (the self) and the object (the world). In "Of Alexander Crummell" Du Bois describes this dichotomy as the primary metaphysical problematic of the nineteenth century:

The nineteenth was the first century of human sympathy,—the age when half wonderingly we began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself; when clodhoppers and peasants, and tramps and thieves, and millionaires and—sometimes—Negroes, became throbbing souls whose warm pulsing life touched us so nearly that we half gasped with surprise, crying, "Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of Hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?" And then all helplessly we peered into those Other-worlds, and wailed, "O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?" (159)

The desire for a completion of the self in the other is one of the stable meanings of *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, under the dominance of



the theme of the text—the problem of the color line, this desire does not readily reveal itself as a philosophical problematic.<sup>25</sup> But like the notions of *consciousness*, *double-consciousness*, *spirit*, and *striving*, the subject/object dichotomy, as Du Bois articulates it, presents a mode of philosophizing that conjoins with the methodologies of the social sciences. The text itself is a hermeneutical enterprise that involves the application of philosophy to “an historical interpretation of race relations” and engages a multiplicity of texts, both literary and philosophical.<sup>26</sup>

That Du Bois's text evolves out of a multiplicity of texts is made explicit by the epigrams and musical bars from the Sorrow Songs that precede each of the fourteen chapters. Written by some of the most prominent (and a few obscure) nineteenth-century poets, the epigraphs are fragments of other texts whose “parergon”<sup>27</sup> or en-framing is constituted by the American and European traditions. These two traditions are in turn infiltrated by other traditions, particularly the Greek and Hebraic traditions. The epigraphs and fragments from the Sorrow Songs therefore implicitly rupture the parameters drawn around *The Souls of Black Folk* by (black) literary criticism. The task of the critic, especially one who proceeds in the direction of Derridean deconstruction, is to demonstrate that implicitness. This is what Houston Baker forgets when he insists that the Sorrow Songs *displace* or *deconstruct* what he calls Western expressive culture: “if you look structurally at Du Bois's text, what you see at the beginning of every chapter is what would now be called, of course, a *displacement* or a deconstruction of Western expressive culture by the spirituals. Alright, I mean he will put Swinburne up there at the top, and then right under it comes the spiritual; I mean it wipes out Swinburne and Byron.”<sup>28</sup>

The movements of deconstruction do not consist in simply opposing one mode of expression with another or in privileging one over the other as Baker does here. On the contrary, they refuse to give anything a privileged status. Furthermore, what they seek, ultimately, is a *dismantling* of the structure of Western philosophy and its presuppositions because, according to Derrida, structures always imply ideology, and ideology always brings interpretation to a close. In this sense, then, Derridean deconstruction would intervene in Western expressive culture in order to reflect on it since, lest we forget, its readings “must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow

and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*.”<sup>29</sup>

There is no such intervention by the Spirituals. Neither do they produce the kind of signifying structure Derrida says critical readings should produce. They can't because, as Du Bois is aware, the Spirituals are very much a part of Western expressive culture. By juxtaposing the bars from the Sorrow Songs with the poetic epigraphs, Du Bois does *not* displace or deconstruct the latter as Houston Baker contends. He merely *foregrounds* the very complex system of interrelationships that makes up his (con)textual field.

In the last chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses the importance of the musical bars. Some of them are from what he refers to as “master songs”—ten Negro folk songs or spirituals that have retained the rhythms of “primitive” African music. The others mark three stages in the development of Black American music: 1) the African songs that were imported from Africa by the newly arrived slaves; 2) the Afro-American field hollers and chants, into which the African rhythms eventually evolved, and 3) the blending of the Afro-American with “the music heard in the foster land” (184). This last stage is important in terms of Du Bois's *aesthetics* because it illustrates what he insists is the reciprocal relationship between the two cultures: “The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody” (185).

Du Bois does not deny, however, that certain breaches or ruptures occurred during this latter stage of the devolution of Afro-American music.<sup>30</sup> He writes that “words and music have lost each other and new and cant phrases of a dimly understood theology have displaced the older sentiment.” He also accuses “conventional theology” and “unmeaning rhapsody” of having concealed the “real poetry and meaning” of the Negro songs (186). While he does not explain what the “older sentiment” was, or what constitutes “real poetry and meaning,” it is interesting to note that Du Bois, whom Henry Louis Gates, Jr., quite accurately identifies as “probably the very first systematic literary and cultural theorist in the tradition,”<sup>31</sup> indicts what has been most influential in the development of the tradition: conventional theology. For as we shall see in the

chapters devoted to feminism and Black American literary criticism and theory, it is theology or onto-theologism<sup>32</sup> disguised under the rubric "criticism" that dictates what works shall and shall not be admitted into the canons of the feminist and Black American literary traditions.

In any event, Du Bois's position vis-à-vis the integral relationship between words (poetry) and music is a reminder that for many preliterate western and nonwestern societies, including that of the early Greeks, poetry was intended to be sung. Du Bois's complaint, like that of Plato, is that in the western tradition the voice—the words—have become subordinate to something else. For Plato that something else was instrumental effects; for Du Bois, as we have seen, it is a "dimly understood theology." In short, in this and in many other instances in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and in his writings on blacks and art, Du Bois is guided by the Platonism of the modern world historical situation. Consequently, he does not in any way displace or "deconstruct" Western expressive culture. He participates in it fully. In fact, Du Bois *positions* himself somewhere between the Western literary and philosophical registers when he writes at the end of "Of the Training of Black Men," "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil" (87).

To sit with Shakespeare, to move with Balzac and Dumas, and to summon Aristotle and Aurelius is to inscribe oneself, implicitly, into a bound—less literal and figurative field of texts, subtexts, and intertexts. *The Souls of Black Folk* has expanded and enriched that field by raising the Veil that for too long has obscured from view a profoundly philosophical aspect of the problem of the color line. It also firmly secures Du Bois within the context of nineteenth-century New England intellectualism and as the first African-American philosopher of (double) consciousness. But Du Bois's influence extended beyond the borders of the continental United States. As we shall see in the next chapter, Du Bois had a profound impact on a group of young black intellectuals from throughout the African diaspora who, by the early 1930s, had gathered together in Paris in the name of black francophone Négritude.

## 2 Reading/Writing Négritude: Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire

Senghor (in Europe rootless and lonely) sings in art—lines  
of Black Woman.

Senghor sighs and, "négritude" needing,  
speaks for others, for brothers. Alfred can tell of  
Poet, and muller, and President of Senegal, who  
in voice and body

loves sun,

listens

to the rich pound in and beneath the black feet of Africa.

—Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*

In *Liberté 3: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel*,<sup>1</sup> the Senegalese poet-philosopher-statesman Léopold Senghor pays tribute to Du Bois and thereby establishes him as a founding father of one of the most influential literary movements of the African diaspora: black francophone Négritude. Senghor writes that it was Du Bois who first thought the problem of Négritude, which is fundamentally a problem of identity, in all of its complexities. He quotes a few lines from Du Bois's famous passage on double-consciousness to support his assertion that in order to understand the basic premises of Négritude, Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk* are the points from which one must always begin.

Senghor describes Du Bois's objectives and methodology as a two-part process. The first has to do with erasing from the minds of whites and blacks the image of the "degenerate black child" (*Nègre-enfant-taré*), and substituting it with one from an authentic "classical" and self-sufficient African civilization. The objective is to promote a desire in Black Americans to model themselves according to this new image of Africans. The next step is to do away with racial discrimination, that is, all of the

constraints—economic, political, cultural, and social—that have reduced blacks to the status of second-class citizens. As Senghor puts it, “In short, it is a question of both an internal and external transformation of the American Negro. Internally, through education and training; externally, by an increasingly strong pressure exerted on public opinion and on the American government” (*Liberté* 3, 275). As we shall see, Senghor and the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire shared Du Bois’s objectives. Their aim was to effect a similar transformation for all diaspora blacks. Like Du Bois, they both sought the creation of a new (black) human subject to replace the (white) image of the black as a “Nègre-enfant-taré.” This transformation or (re)definition of the black subject was to be carried out primarily through objective forms of cultural production. Central to this (re)definition, for African-Americans and for “*les Nègro-africains*,” was a recovery, reconstitution, and (re)affirmation of the history and culture of the peoples of African descent. But these aims and objectives were articulated through the complex discourses of philosophy and the human sciences. In this chapter, I will specify the similarities and differences between Du Bois, Senghor, and Césaire and draw out the significance and implications of their discourses for an emergent criticism and theory specific to literary texts written by blacks.



In “Problématique de la Négritude,” Senghor poses two questions that are crucial, both to Du Bois’s notion of “double-consciousness,” and to Négritude as an organizing concept for the category of blackness: “1) Does there exist, for blacks, specific problems based on the single fact that they have black skin or that they belong to an ethnic group which is different from that of the white and the yellow races? 2) What are these problems and under what circumstances are they raised” (*Liberté* 3, 269)? We have seen how Du Bois responds to the first question through his formulation of the notion of “double-consciousness” and how he presents the problems—as they affect African-Americans—through the theories and practices of the social sciences. But for Négritude and its practitioners the term *Négritude* itself is an important part of the problematic.

Senghor tries to resolve the problem by appealing to the laws of grammar (Senghor has complete and absolute faith in *French* grammar). In response to critics who have attacked Aimé Césaire for using the word *Négritude* instead of *Négrité* to convey the idea of blackness, Senghor argues that the suffixes *-ité* and *-itude* (from the Latin *-itas* and *-itudo*) con-

vey the same meaning and that when Césaire coined the word he followed the most orthodox rules of the French language (*Liberté* 3, 269). Négritude therefore takes as its model the French word/concept *latinité*. Senghor refers to the *Petit Robert* definition of *latinité* to prove his point that *Négritude* is a perfectly legitimate term according to the French lexicon. “The *Petit Robert* defines the word *latinité* as follows: ‘1) way of writing or speaking Latin. Latin character; 2) (1835) the Latin world, Latin civilization. *The spirit of Latinity*.’ According to this model, we could very well define Négritude as a ‘way of expressing oneself as a black person. Black character. The black world, black civilization’” (*Liberté* 3, 269).

The notion of *latinité* is a fundamental authority for Négritude’s systematic thematic closure. Its grammar and logic are tools that work in the interest of establishing the limits of Négritude. They fix the norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories of blackness—concepts and theories appropriated primarily from the ethnography of Leo Frobenius—by which Négritude identifies itself and presents itself as what it is.<sup>2</sup> Négritude as a mode of philosophical reflection therefore takes epistemology as its point of departure.

The German ethnographer Leo Frobenius marks an important intersection between Du Bois, who often referred to his work in his own writings about Africa, and Senghor and Césaire.<sup>3</sup> It is through Frobenius’s categories of ethnography that the latter two arrive where the former began: with German philosophy and Hegel. Senghor began to study Frobenius and ethnography in Paris at the Institute of Ethnography (*Liberté* 3, 13). This led him to “rediscover” the German philosophers, especially Hegel, Marx, and Engels whose works Senghor began to devour after his incarceration in a German POW camp.<sup>4</sup>

In “Négritude et Germanité” Senghor explains that the German *Wirklichkeitssinn* (sense of reality) is what impressed him most about German philosophy and inspired him after his discharge in 1942 from the POW camp to renew his acquaintance with its major philosophers. “If . . . I again immersed myself in the German philosophers, beginning with Marx, Engels and Hegel; if after Sartre, I discovered Heidegger, it’s undoubtedly because I felt, even among the socialist thinkers, that *Wirklichkeitssinn* which is the mark of German genius. Whether he observes matter or life, the fact or the phenomenon, even if he refuses it a priori, the German philosopher cannot resist going beyond the physical, into the *meta-physical*” (*Liberté* 3, 16). Senghor says much the same thing in “Négritude et Germanité II.” However, what he stresses in those remarks is that

as he pursued the course he had outlined for himself, he ended up where he thought he should have begun—with Hegel: “after my discharge and demobilization in 1942, I again immersed myself in the German philosophers, beginning with Marx and Engels in order to end up where I should have begun: with Hegel to whom I added Husserl and Heidegger upon the advice of our compatriot, the philosopher Gaston Berger” (*Liberté* 3, 342). And in “La Négritude est accordée au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle,” Senghor writes, “The paleontologists and ethnographers had proven to us that it is by relying on the natural environment, by reacting upon it, that man has moved away from animality. First Hegel, and then Marx and Engels presented man as having been produced by his own generic activity” (*Liberté* 3, 237).

Senghor was initially similarly attracted to Frobenius because he felt that the German ethnographer was the first to present a theory of the origin of culture and civilization that was compatible with Négritude as it was articulated in the 1940s. Like Césaire and the other Négritude poets, Senghor considered Frobenius’s *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* and *Le Destin des civilisations* as “sacred” texts (*Liberté* 3, 13).

In these works, Frobenius argues persuasively that all cultures or civilizations, including African civilization, arise from the shock or *saisissement* experienced by man upon his contact with the real. According to Senghor, Frobenius calls this experience *païdeuma*. Senghor explains that *païdeuma*, as he understands Frobenius’s use of the term, has to do with man’s capacity to respond emotionally to the essence of things in such a way that it penetrates into his *conscience païdeumatique* or “cultural soul”<sup>5</sup> and acquires a new form as it passes from emotion to speech and finally to myth and idea. Emotion is crucial to Frobenius’s concept of culture. Thus it comes as no surprise that the Négritude writers and poets felt that Frobenius, by strongly emphasizing the importance of emotion in the development of culture, had called into question popular European beliefs about Africa’s lack of culture and civilization.

Frobenius had also called into question the traditional Western priority of discursive over intuitive reason. This is important, for as Senghor points out in “Les Leçons de Léo Frobenius,” before encountering Frobenius who “clarified for [them] such words as *emotion*, *art*, *myth*, and *Eurafrique*,” the young blacks of the Quartier Latin were taught by instructors who, following the Cartesian method, insisted that they were to always allow themselves to be guided only by discursive reason—by fact, not feeling (*Liberté* 3, 399). In contrast, Frobenius had argued against this

“dogmatic belief in the value of scientific knowledge,” to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault,<sup>6</sup> and its dominion over thinking in the modern Western world.

In *Le Destin des civilisations* Frobenius writes, “What we call civilization is often the expression of the soul, the language of the soul, at least when it has to do with men, whose thinking is still and especially *intuitive*.”<sup>7</sup> This was an important lesson for Senghor who insists that “it is Frobenius who, more than all the others, more than Bergson, even, redeemed in our eyes intuitive reason and restored it to its place: to first place. After him we undertook a rereading of the philosophers and discovered that the Greeks granted priority to intuitive reason and that Descartes himself considered ‘feeling’ as one of the aspects of reason” (*Liberté* 3, 400). For Senghor, Césaire, and the other “Négritudists,” this restoration of the primacy of emotion and intuition over discursive reason was essential to their struggle to recover their ethnic and cultural identity. Indeed, Négritude cannot be thought without the category of intuition and the notion that there exists a recoverable *original* “Negro-African” culture (*la culture négro-africain*).

In “Qu’est-ce que la négritude?” Senghor defines Négritude as “the totality of the values of the civilization of the black world as it is expressed in the life and the works of black people” (*Liberté* 3, 90). The notion of an original civilization whose originality is constituted by the Negro-African as natural man (*l’homme de la nature*) is central to Senghor’s articulation of Négritude as a philosophical problematic. Following Frobenius’s formulation of the binary opposition between discursive and intuitive reason and between the domains of factual and real phenomena, Senghor argues that what distinguishes the “negro-africain” from the European white is his mode of reasoning.<sup>8</sup> He writes that the former is guided by what he considers the basis of negro-african ontology: *intuitive reason*, while the latter’s mode of reasoning is *discursive*. In other words, the European brings his analytical skills to bear upon a given object in order to take control of it. In so doing he never goes beyond mere appearances. The black man, through the power of his emotions, feels the object before it is bodily given and is therefore able to go beyond mere appearance to grasp the deeper reality for which the object is only a symbol (*Liberté* 3, 92).

By recasting Frobenius’s binary, discursive/intuitive reason into a cultural-historical context specific to the Negro-African, and by emphasizing the idea of the object and the notion of a recoverable origin as organizing concepts for his philosophical system—indeed, by thinking

Négritude based on models provided by the concept of *latinité* and by ethnography, Senghor raises a phenomenological problematic that Négritude, because of its own ontological limits, is unable to address. For what is at issue in Négritude as Senghor articulates it is the role of the "Negro" subject/perceiver in the immediate apprehension of psychic and physical phenomena. Senghor insists that the black man feels (*Il sent*, from the verb *sentir*) the object before he sees it; that is, the object is somehow *presupposed* before it is bodily given, or represented. His theory raises yet another set of philosophical problems: the problems of *objectification*, *representation* (the privileged domain of everything that is), and *intentionality*, or the intentional acts—attention, will, desire, love, judgment, and so on—by which all lived experiences and all psychic comportment address themselves to what is.<sup>9</sup> These three categories help to determine the structure of intuitive reason which, let us not forget, is the basis of Senghor's Negro-African ontology.



According to Husserl, who by the mid-1940s had been added along with Heidegger to Senghor's list of contemporary German philosophers, intuition has to do with our "immediate perception of what is concrete" and is intrinsic to all human beings. Husserl refers to intuition as the "*essentially naïve natural attitude*" by which "human being" is "intentionally" directed toward the world and posits it (the world) as existing "without questioning the meaning of this existence and of the 'fact of its being given.'"<sup>10</sup> The fact of the existence of the world is "apodictically evident" or absolutely indubitable.

Concrete life as the object of intuition is not constituted by "purely theoretical representations" or objects as sets of physical properties, however. Intentions, which are themselves representations, are also constitutive of concrete life. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it in his interpretation of Husserl's theory of intuition, the world of action, beauty, ugliness, meanness, will, and desire all constitute the existence of the world and its rich structures in the same measure as such purely theoretical representations or categories as spatiality: "Will, desire, etc., are intentions which, along with representations, constitute the existence of the world. They are not elements of consciousness void of all relation to objects. Because of this, the existence of the world has a rich structure which differs in each different domain."<sup>11</sup>

Senghor, by positioning himself (and Négritude) as he does, confronts

a problem that faces any form of philosophical reflection: namely the inadequacy of philosophical language to represent the rich structures of the world's existence or to recapture a lost experience or origin. Reflection represents a specific eurocentric or methodological concept that belongs to a tradition (a textual or conceptual "field") *beyond* which the Négritude writers are trying to reach. Their quest for *noir*-ness is, fundamentally, a quest for a more original African (Césaire argues for a more original Greek) *life-world*<sup>12</sup> or world of already lived experiences with all of its rich structures. But within the parameters of the tradition of reflection, indeed, within the parameters of the language of dialectics with which the discourse of Négritude is heavily invested—perhaps within language itself—there is no possibility of experiencing this world or its structures.<sup>13</sup> Language exists as an *event* in the human being's lived experience. Language is what establishes, by the mere act of naming things-in-the-world, a community between beings and the life-world. Therefore, in order to raise the question of the origin of that world, it would seem that one would have to step outside of language itself.

Similarly, reflection does not allow for a retrogression to something which is not present in any way. That which is not present, in this case the *origin* of the African life-world, may only construct itself in the very process of moving back outside traditional philosophical reflection. Senghor attempts such a de(con)structive gesture by accusing writing of impoverishing the real, by locating *all* of African civilization beyond writing, and by seeking, albeit blindly, the principles of an African aesthetic in Heidegger's notion of *logos*.

In his highly mediated reading of Heidegger, Senghor tries to establish a link between the *logos* as the "foundation of being" and what he calls the "negro-african philosophy of the word":

Heidegger began with the verb *legen* [*sic*, to lay] and the noun *logos* in order to examine the respective but convergent evolution of their significations, especially the ones they had at the very beginnings of Greek thought. . . . *Legen* began by signifying "to lay out" [*étendre*] or "letting-lie-before-gathering" [*laisser-étendu-devant-rassemblé*], before signifying "to pre-sent" [*présenter*], "to dis-close" [*exposer*], "to say" [*dire*], whereas *logos* signified "thoughtful pose" [*pose recueillement*], or more explicitly, thought-made-manifest [*recueillement rendant manifest*], or better, "thought and apprehension of the being of being" [*recueillement et appréhension de l'être de l'étant*]. We are not too far from

the Negro-African philosophy of the word. For it also, as we have seen, to speak [*parler*] is to gather [*recueillir*] the vital force, the being of being beneath its rough outline in order to lay it out by giving it form, that is to say, existence. (*Liberté* 3, 234)

It should be noted here that Heidegger's notion of logos, as it is articulated in "Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B, 50)"<sup>14</sup> and in *Being and Time*, is much more complicated than the way it is presented in Senghor's summary. Heidegger, in his discussion of phenomenology in *Being and Time*,<sup>15</sup> deals with the logos as one of the two components, "phenomenon" and "logos," that constitute the expression *phenomenology*. Phenomenon signifies "that which shows itself in itself, the manifest" (BT 51). It stands in a relationship with semblance; but like semblance, it must be distinguished from appearance, which is not a "showing-itself," but rather "the announcing-itself by something which does not show itself, but which announces itself through something which does show itself" (BT 52). Stated differently, although phenomena are never appearances, every appearance is dependent on phenomena. Consequently, appearance is often understood as phenomena.

The word *logos*, whose basic signification is *discourse*, is also interpreted as *judgment, concept, definition, ground, or relationship*. As discourse, logos means making "manifest what one is talking about in one's discourse." It "lets something be seen, namely, what the discourse is about." Both *phenomenon* and *logos* therefore involve showing or letting-be-seen. Phenomenology means, then, "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (BT 58). It differs from such expressions as theology, and so forth, in that it "neither designates the object of its researches, nor characterizes the subject-matter thus comprised. The word merely informs us of the 'how' with which *what* is to be treated in this science gets exhibited and handled." (BT 59). The *what* in this case is the Being of entities whose meaning, which has been so "extensively covered up and forgotten," can only be approached phenomenologically. According to Heidegger, "only as phenomenology is ontology possible" (BT 60).

Senghor's reading of Heidegger places him back in the domain of metaphysical reflection. He blindly assumes that Heidegger—through his preoccupation with the relationship between (hu)man, Being, the *logos* and *poësis*—is engaged in a "modern universal humanism" with its emphasis upon the "role and action of Man in and upon the world" (*Liberté* 3,

237). To this form of humanism, Senghor argues, the Negro-African and Negro-African culture, in short Négritude, have already responded affirmatively, particularly in the arts. As an idea, philosophy, life, theory, practice, ethic (*une morale*), and art—as an "objective civilization,"<sup>16</sup>—a *humanism*—Négritude therefore takes as its object Man. Heidegger, on the other hand, is concerned with what humanism, as it is articulated in twentieth-century discourses, obscures from man: his *essence* and its relation to the *truth* of Being.



In the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger questions the very terms—logic, ethics, physics—indeed the term humanism itself, that Senghor gathers under the rubric Négritude. Heidegger strongly implies that these terms, dominated as they are by the demands of the market of public opinion, signal a movement away from philosophy as thinking to philosophy as an occupation in competition with other such occupations and "isms": "One no longer thinks, but one occupies oneself with 'philosophy.' In competition such occupations publicly present themselves as 'isms' and try to outdo each other. The domination achieved through such terminology does not just happen. It rests, especially in modern times, on the peculiar dictatorship of the public ("Letter" 273). The instrument of this domination is language, which, in the process of objectifying and making accessible to everybody everything that is, becomes impoverished. It thereby endangers man's essence. It leaves the truth of that essence unthought.

Heidegger's notion of humanism consists merely in reinstating man in the "nearness of Being," of bringing man back to his essence: "Thus *humanitas* remains the concern of such thought; for this is humanism: to reflect and to care that man be human and not un-human, 'inhuman,' i.e., outside of his essence. Yet, of what does the humanity of man consist? It rests in his essence" ("Letter" 274). Heidegger feels that in the modern world this essence has been determined by the Marxist acknowledgment of man as a social being whose natural needs are secured through material production and by the Christian conception of man as the "delimitation of *deitas*," the "child of God who hears in Christ the claim of the Father and accepts it" ("Letter" 275). But humanism as *humanitas* is first encountered during the Roman republic when the term signified the following distinction between the *homo humanus* and the *homo barbarus*:

The *homo humanus* is here the Roman who exalts and ennoble the Roman *virtus* by the "incorporation" of the *paideia*, taken over from the Greeks. The Greeks are the Greeks of Hellenism, whose culture was taught in the philosophical schools. It is the *eruditio et institutio in bonas artes*. *Paideia* so understood, is translated by *humanitas*. The authentic *romanitas* of the *homo humanus* consists of such *humanitas*. In Rome we encounter the first humanism. It, thus, remains in its essence a specific Roman phenomenon, born of the encounter between the Roman and Hellenistic cultures. ("Letter" 275)

All subsequent humanisms derive from this Roman *humanitas*. And while they differ in aims, doctrines, etc., they all "coincide in that the *humanitas* of the *homo humanus* is determined from the view of an already-established interpretation of nature, of history, of world, of the basis of the world (*Weltgrund*), i.e. of beings in their totality" ("Letter" 276). In accord with Heidegger, then, to think Négritude as a humanism is to further impede the questioning of the relation of Being to the essence of (the black) man. As a humanism in competition with the dominant European institutions of knowledge, Négritude does not allow for the possibility of thinking Negro-African culture in a new and original way. This kind of thinking requires that one move "away from the thin abstractions of representational thinking and the stratospheric constructions of scientific theorizing, and toward the full concreteness, the onefoldness of the manifold, of actual life-experience."<sup>17</sup> From a Heideggerian perspective, the only domain that opens up such a possibility is that of the poetic experience. But as we shall see, in Négritude that domain, like all its other constitutive domains, is dominated by the already established Western (German, French, Greek) interpretation of nature, the world, and beings in their totality.



The domain of the poetic experience is privileged in Négritude because, as Senghor points out in his reading of Heidegger, it is the domain where the *logos* stands in close proximity to beings and Being. But Senghor, *occupied* as he is with philosophy, can only explain the complex relation between the *logos*, beings, and Being in terms of its instrumentality. Heidegger on the other hand thinks of the relation as a "site" on which poetry and thinking are brought together. In *On the Way to Language* Heidegger writes that *logos* "speaks simultaneously as the name for

Being and for Saying" and is specifically directed toward what he calls the nearness or the "neighborhood of poetry and thinking."<sup>18</sup> The word *saying*, which is related to the Old Norse *saga*, means "to show, to make appear, the lighting-concealing-releasing offer of world" (OWL 107). It is the "guiding key word" to the nearness or "neighborhood" of poetry and thinking, themselves modes of Saying, which, in their "face-to-face" encounter with each other, open up the possibility for a *thinking* experience with language. This thinking experience offers no commonsense or practical wisdom, however. It is not a problem-solving enterprise. What it offers is the possibility of experiencing the essence or the "primal tidings of linguistic nature." What it draws us close to is "*The being of language: the language of being*" (OWL 94).

Language in this context is not thought of as a mere human faculty, a fact that Senghor overlooks in his appropriation of Heidegger. Heidegger writes that, in the Western metaphysical tradition, language as a human faculty is "represented as speech in the sense of vocal sounds" and is placed within the "metaphysically conceived confines of the sensuous" (OWL 97). From within these confines what remains to be questioned with regard to the being of language is, according to Heidegger, "whether the real nature of the sounds and tones of speech is thus ever experienced and kept before our eyes" or whether the technological and calculating perspective of physiology and physics keep us from *properly* considering the kinship between melody and rhythm and song and speech as an essential property of language (OWL 98). Hence, from this perspective, Senghor has not considered the matter "properly." In his attempt to place Negro-African culture 'beyond' writing, he appeals to the technological. In fact, he bases Négritude's "aesthetic dimension" and the privileged place occupied by poetry in that dimension on a "metaphysical-technological" explanation.

Senghor describes the Negro-African poet and his French counterpart as technicians. Like the mathematician with his variables, they are masters of their tools (*outils*), of language (*langue*) and of speech (*parole*). And they all have something to say. "The sculptor, the painter, the architect, indeed the musician, has, first of all, something to say. And he says it in his language which is a panoply of instruments, dictionary of signs, net for the miraculous draught of metaphors [*filet pour la pêche miraculeuse des métaphores*]" (*Liberté* 3, 25). Thus we arrive once again to what I referred to in chapter 1 as a "classic philosopheme" and "metaphysical concept," *metaphoricity*. We also arrive at an important juncture between the

poetry and poetics of Négritude and that of continental France: the poet of signs, symbols and metaphoricity par excellence, Stéphane Mallarmé.



It might seem somewhat ironic that although Mallarmé is considered one of the nineteenth century's most obscure and inaccessible poets, the Négritude poets found much to admire in his work. According to Senghor, what attracted the Négritude poets to Mallarmé was his desire for a poetry that would liberate the word from any kind of function or instrumentality. In *Pour une lecture Nègro-Africain de Mallarmé* he explains that nothing is more essentially black or Mallarméan than a poetics in which the word is not reduced to its primary function. Hence the point in which their thinking about poetry converges: "Here we touch on one of the underlying reasons for bringing Mallarmé and the black poets together. We are all striving, in a similar ontological design, to 'give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe:' to give them, through that purity, the power to invoke the hidden world."<sup>19</sup>

Mallarmé goes beyond this point, however. He tries to render all meaning impossible because he believes that only when language fails—when language means *nothing*—can lyric poetry, as an absolute idea, come to be. The mere possibility of lyric poetry, Mallarmé believes, rests upon the notion of nothingness or the void, a notion that Négritude, as a humanism and as a philosophy of presence, finds intolerable. What this all means is that while Senghor embraces Mallarmé and symbolism for their reaction against rationalist positivism and for the primacy they give to intuitive reason, he must also reject them on the grounds that what the Negro-African ultimately seeks in symbolism is not the "*idée pure*" or the abstract, but the concrete—the *beyond* as it is made manifest in each lived experience. Nevertheless, Senghor feels that because symbolism places so much emphasis on intuition, its impact on Négritude, as well as that of Mallarmé, cannot be overstated.<sup>20</sup> As Senghor puts it, "It's this primacy given to intuitive over discursive reason that explains, at the end of the 19th century, the encounter between Stéphane Mallarmé and Négritude."<sup>21</sup>

By the force of his argument about the primacy of intuitive over discursive reason, by his upholding of the ideal of intuition, which like objectivity, is grounded in the epistemological model of the Cartesian tradition, Senghor brings us full circle. We have come to the beginning point once again. But as we have already seen in the previous chapter on

Du Bois, what is at issue with regard to the hermeneutic circle is not its circularity, since circularity is what underlies and is presupposed by all understanding and interpretation. What remains to be asked is whether Senghor, through his logic and by dint of his having to pass through the beginning point again and again, makes of the hermeneutic circle a *circulus vitiosus*. On this question let us turn now toward Aimé Césaire.



#### Cercle non vicieux

Penser est trop bruyant  
 a trop de mains pousse trop de hannetons  
 Du reste je ne me suis jamais trompé  
 les hommes ne m'ont jamais déçu ils ont des regards qui  
 les débordent  
 La nature n'est pas compliquée  
 Toutes mes suppositions sont justes  
 Toutes mes implications fructueuses  
 Aucun cercle n'est vicieux  
 Creux  
 Il n'y a que mes genoux de noueux et qui s'enfoncent  
 pierreux  
 dans le travail  
 des autres et leur sommeil<sup>22</sup>

#### Nonvicious Circle

Thinking is too noisy  
 has too many hands grows too many cockchafers  
 Moreover I have never been wrong  
 men have never disappointed me they have looks which  
 transcend them  
 Nature is not complicated  
 All my assumptions are correct  
 All my implications fruitful  
 No circle is ever vicious  
 Hollow  
 It is just my knees which are knotty and sink  
 stonelike  
 into the labor  
 of others and their sleep<sup>23</sup>



"*Aucun cercle n'est vicieux.*" This raises yet another question: why is no circle vicious? The poem seems to imply that, at least within the domain of the poetic experience, thinking, through its excessiveness, negates the conditions for establishing the necessary logical paradoxes by which the viciousness of the circle is generated.<sup>24</sup> This excessiveness is articulated through the first line of the poem, "*Penser est trop bruyant*/Thinking is too noisy," by the repetition in the second line of the adverb *trop* (too, too much, too many) and in the fifth line by the third person plural form of the verb *déborder* (to overflow, go beyond, surpass). This is not to suggest, however, that "*Cercle non vicieux*" does not establish itself in a logico-rhetorical manner. At a functional level, lines three through eight do precisely that. They affirm the correctness and productivity of all of the suppositions and implications of the "I" before positing it as an authority on circles. They invest the thinking/speaking subject with the power to make the claim that "*Aucun cercle n'est vicieux.*"

Like Senghor or, for that matter, any writer engaged in developing strategies for interpreting what is, Césaire is also entrapped in the hermeneutic circle. But he enters it differently. Despite the by now well known fact that he was the first to use the term *Négritude* in an attempt to define the essence of blackness, Césaire is not as *occupied* as Senghor with *Négritude*, philosophy, and humanism. In fact, he rejects *Négritude* as an ideology and therefore opens it up to greater, and perhaps more "deconstructive" potentialities.

Césaire also rejects any theory of literature that places literature at the service of a politics. He therefore stands in opposition to critical and theoretical enterprises that attempt to develop standards for judging literary works based on prevailing dogmas. For example, Césaire once remarked to Lilyan Kesteloot that from a literary point of view and as a personal ethic, he accepts *Négritude*. But during his discussion with Kesteloot he made it clear that he was opposed to an ideology based on *Négritude* because he didn't believe that it or any theory of literature was of much value when placed at the service of a politics.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not Césaire has since changed his attitude about the political value of literary theories is open to debate. Suffice it to say that, at least through the 1970s, when it comes to literature Césaire's primary concern seems to be with literature *as such*—with the relation between language, writing, poetry, thinking, and being—and the extent to which the domain of the poetic experience opens up the possibility of discovering the being of blackness. This is not to suggest that Senghor is any less

talented, dedicated, or engaged a poet than Césaire, however. On that point, Senghor's poetry speaks for itself. But Senghor's poetry is in the interest of *some* thing, whether it be *Négritude*, universal humanism, or some form of nationalism; whereas Césaire's involvement with poetry is in the interest of the *disclosedness of being* (black). Since the *disclosedness of being* has no interest other than being as such, the concept of being does not run the risk of becoming an ideology. It simply places the poet in a very close proximity to thinking and to the "pure idea."

In a provocative article titled "Sur une poésie nationale," which was written in response to René Depestre's proposal for a national poetry for black people, Césaire argues against a poetry that does not just let poetry *be*. He writes that Depestre, whose "Un débat autour des conditions d'une poésie nationale chez les peuples noirs," is strongly influenced by Louis Aragon's essays on a national French poetry, has not presented the problem well.<sup>26</sup> Césaire feels that Depestre subverts his own intention by specifying Aragon's nationalism as a model for a national "Antillian" poetry. Césaire argues that Depestre is correct when he writes that "it would be a mistake on our part, a denial of nationalism, to ignore the African screen, [le volet africain] which figures at the window of our national traditions."<sup>27</sup> But Depestre contradicts himself by following Aragon, whose model renders subordinate everything that is not French or is not compatible with the French prosodical heritage (*l'héritage prosodique français*). (It should be noted that Senghor makes the same mistake, particularly in his essays on the virtues of the French language, French poetry, French culture, the French press, and just about everything else that can be called French.)

The problem, then, becomes one of grounds, for if Aragon's model is the best one for a national Antillian poetry as Depestre contends, the elements that constitute the African screen or *volet*, which the poet seeks to retain risk being rejected in the process of elimination he would be required to undergo in order to "harmoniously" integrate them into the French poetic tradition.<sup>28</sup> Césaire calls this a strange reversal of values and accuses Depestre of falling into a "detestable assimilationism."<sup>29</sup>

This kind of assimilationism presupposes a fixed form into which the poet need only recall his experience. It also posits a metaphor—"mouler son inspiration." Césaire urges the poet to struggle against this kind of metaphor so that the poem, as a portion or "afflux" of life, may find or invent its own equilibrium. "It is decidedly high time to react against this kind of metaphor. You say 'mouler son inspiration,' etc. . . . etc. . . . the

truth is totally different. A poem is a part of life, a flood of life which takes hold of sonorous reality and finds, invents for itself its own equilibrium."<sup>30</sup>

Césaire is equally opposed to the idea of an a priori fixed traditional European or African form capable of accommodating the experiences of the modern black poet. He argues that the latter can only result in exoticism, which, in his opinion, is as serious or grave a problem as assimilation. "To think that there is an African form into which the poem must fit at all costs, to think that it is a question, in this mold constituted in advance, of forcibly fitting into it our experience as modern black poets, seems to me the best way of running, this time not into assimilationism, but something no less serious, into exoticism."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for Césaire, these borrowed forms are insufficient for a national poetry. He feels that for there to be a national poetry, one must let poetry be. (*Que la poésie soit—et c'est tout*). In order for a national poetry to be, its domain can only be circumscribed by the *authentic*, by the manner in which the poet comports himself toward the poem: "I think that if the poet commits himself in a way that is truly complete, his poetics, if he is African can be nothing other than an African poetics; that if the poem is good, if the poem comes from far enough away, it can only carry the poet's mark, his essential mark, that is to say, his national mark. Who, more than the poet, is of his time, his milieu, his people?"<sup>32</sup>

In "Poésie et connaissance," an essay that elaborates a kind of "criterion for pure poetry," Césaire implies that to commit oneself totally is to come to the poem with all of one's being, to saturate the poem that is to be (*le poème qui va se faire*) with the totality of one's lived experiences; in short, to cease to practice poetry (and perhaps, philosophy) as an occupation and to enter into the *adventure* of poetry.<sup>33</sup> Césaire feels that only when the poet and the poem have no other ambition than that of poetry itself, will the mark of nationality be inscribed upon them.

In what is perhaps his most strident remark about his own status as a national poet, Césaire rejects the very premises—the "isms" by which he has been identified—on the grounds that beyond marking solidarity among the most insulted people in history, they serve no aesthetic purpose. "They talk about my 'inspiration négriste,' my 'pan-négrisme,' etc. . . . This really makes no sense. To be aware of being black when one lives in a world infected with racism; to think that this consciousness imposes on those who have it, special tasks—such as solidarity with the most insulted people in history—in no way merits the pomp of some 'ism.'"<sup>34</sup>

Césaire concludes "Sur la poésie national" by arguing that black poets have nothing to gain by locking themselves in an aesthetic whose historical considerations are unclear simply because it responds to someone's personal tastes: the dialectics of an epoch do not amount to the whims of a privileged few. He also feels that Black poets are mature enough to run the risks of the *adventure* of freedom and to pay the price exacted by poetry and by revolution: "we are grown-up enough to run, at our risk and peril, the great adventure of Freedom; our poetry exists at the cost of our right to initiative, as well as our right to error. I'm thinking about poetry. And revolution also."<sup>35</sup>

The condition for poetry (and perhaps for revolution) as Césaire understands it is what he believes Mallarmé and the surrealists were able to effect through their violent attacks on the French language, that is, the complete failure of language itself. Mallarmé had achieved what Césaire says he had always tried to do: he "dislodged" the French language from its performative function by making it *inflective* rather than *reflective*. Césaire discusses the great influence Mallarmé had on him in an interview with Jacqueline Leiner:

I have always wanted to *inflect* French. Thus, if I have really liked Mallarmé, it's because he showed me, because I understood through him, that language is, basically, arbitrary. This is not a natural phenomenon. That prodigious phrase that Mallarmé wrote: "*my instinct regrets that discourse fails. . . . Only, let us know that verse would never exist: philosophically, it remunerates the defect of languages.*" . . . my effort has been to *inflect* French, to *transform* it in order to express, let us say, "this me, this me-negro, this me-creole, this me martinican, this me-antillais." That is why I am much more interested in poetry than in prose and the former *to the extent that it's the poet who creates his language.*<sup>36</sup>

Like Mallarmé, Césaire feels that he is remaking language. But he insists that this new language is *not* French: "I am remaking a language which is not French. If the French find themselves there, it's their problem!"<sup>37</sup> He feels that this new, inflective language and the mode of writing he adopted from the surrealists could help to "decolonize" the French language (and the black mind) by resisting the assimilationists and the dominant, eurocentric culture. And most importantly, it could help to conjure up, from the depths of the unconscious, not only that which is "fundamentally black" but that which can be called *true poetry*.<sup>38</sup>

Césaire explains to Jacqueline Leiner that for him, *true poetry* is subversive to the extent that it rises from out of the depths rather the surface of oneself.<sup>39</sup> True poetry is subversive (*boulversante*) because it takes language out of its role in everyday experience. In everyday experience, language as communication takes on an authoritative character: "Things are so because one says so."<sup>40</sup> This authoritative character of language therefore encourages an "undifferentiated kind of intelligibility" that "releases one from the task of genuinely understanding" the entities within-the-world by prescribing one's state-of-mind and determining what one thinks and how one sees.<sup>41</sup> Poetic language seeks to establish itself as a "counter-communication" in order to return language to what, in Heidegger's words, are the "primal tidings of linguistic nature," or what Césaire calls, in "Poésie et connaissance," its pure condition (*l'état pur*): "A pure condition. That is to say subject not to custom or belief, but to the unique urging of the cosmos. The poet's word, the primitive word: rupestral design in sonorous material."<sup>42</sup> In a poem entitled "Mot" (Word), Césaire shows how in everyday language the word, loaded as it is with signification, obstructs one's access to a genuine understanding of the nature of one's being-in-the-world:

## Mot

Parmi moi  
de moi-même  
à moi-même  
hors toute constellation  
en mes mains serré seulement  
le rare hoquet d'un ultime spasme délirant  
vibre mot  
j'aurai chance hors du labyrinthe  
plus long plus large vibre  
en ondes de plus en plus serrées  
en lasso où me prendre  
en corde où me pendre  
et que me clouent toutes les flèches  
et leur curare le plus amer  
au beau poteau-mitan des très fraîches étoiles  
vibre  
vibre essence même de l'ombre  
en aile en gosier c'est à force de périr

le mot nègre  
sorti tout armé du hurlement  
d'une fleur vénéneuse  
le mot nègre  
tout pouacre de parasites  
le mot nègre  
tout plein de brigands qui rodent  
des mères qui crient  
d'enfants qui pleurent  
le mot nègre  
un gresillement de chairs qui brûlent  
acre et de corne  
le mot nègre  
comme le soleil qui saigne de la griffe  
sur le trottoir des nuages  
le mot nègre  
comme le dernier rire vèlé de l'innocence  
entre les crocs du tigre  
et comme le mot soleil est un claquement de balles  
et comme le mot nuit un taffetas qu'on déchire  
le mot nègre  
dru savez-vous  
de tonnerre d'un été  
que s'arrogent  
des libertés incrédules

## Word

Within me  
from myself  
to myself  
outside any constellation  
clenched in my hands only  
the rare hiccup of an ultimate raving spasm  
keep vibrating word  
I will have luck outside of the labyrinth  
longer wider keep vibrating  
in tighter and tighter waves  
in a lasso to catch me  
in a rope to hang me

and let me be nailed by all the arrows  
and their bitterest curare  
to the beautiful center stake of very cool stars

vibrate

vibrate you very essence of the dark  
in a wing in a throat from so much perishing  
the word nigger

emerged fully armed from the howling  
of a poisonous flower

the word nigger  
all filthy with parasites

the word nigger  
loaded with roaming bandits

with screaming mothers  
crying children

the word nigger  
a sizzling of flesh and horny matter

burning, acrid  
the word nigger

like the sun bleeding from its claws  
onto the sidewalk of clouds

the word nigger  
like the last laugh calved by innocence

between the tiger's fangs  
and as the word sun is a ringing of bullets

and the word night a ripping of taffeta  
the word nigger

dense, right?  
from the thunder of a summer

appropriated by  
the incredulous liberties<sup>43</sup>

In the beginning the word is bound up with the "Moi" as a kind of primordial totality. Outside of any constellation except the one constituted by the "Moi," tightly clenched in its hands, the word does not vibrate. But that totality is ruptured in the sixth verse by the "rare hiccup." In the seventh verse the word begins to vibrate, perhaps creating the labyrinth in the eighth verse, outside of which the speaking subject will have luck.

The vibrating spreads in verse nine. And in verses ten through fifteen the vibrating word does violence to the speaking subject. Its waves "lasso and rope him to a vodun center stake where a shamanic sacrifice ensues."<sup>44</sup> the curare on the arrow tips is emptied into him with all the bitterness of the howling, vibrating word. In lines sixteen and seventeen, the sacrificed speaking subject challenges the already vibrating word: "vibre/vibre essence même de l'ombre." The vibrating word responds by springing out, armed with its "howl" in all of its traditional, social, and historical implications, from the poisonous flower. This vibrating word is a signifying word: *nigger* (*noir*), which as the last two lines of the poem affirm, arrogates to itself "incredulous liberties." Those "incredulous liberties" are what Césaire seeks to deprive the excessive and licentious vibrating/signifying word of so that poetry and perhaps Being (black) can be restored to a more pure condition. And it is to that end that Césaire, like Mallarmé, cultivates the "rare word" (*le mot rare*) and the tight syntactical structures characteristic of Mallarmé's sonnets.<sup>45</sup>

Let us take as an example of Césaire's pure or "true poetry" the poem titled, ironically perhaps, "Présence":

tout un mai de cañeficiers  
sur la poitrine de pur hoquet  
d'une île adultère de site  
chair qui soit prise de soi-même vendange  
O lente entre les dacites  
pincée d'oiseaux qu'attise un vent  
ou passent fondues les chutes du temps  
la pur foison d'un rare miracle  
dans l'orage toujours crédule  
d'une saison non évasive

Presence

a whole May of canafistulas  
on the chest of pure hiccup  
of an island adulterous to its site  
flesh which having possessed itself harvests its grape self  
O slow among the dacites  
a pinch of birds fanned by a wind  
in which the cataracts of time pass blended

the sheer profusion of a rare miracle  
in the ever credulous storm  
of a nonevasive season<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to "Mot," which, despite its complexity, opens itself up to interpretation through a vocabulary familiar to most readers of French and through the repetition of the verb "vibrer" and the phrase "le mot nègre," "Présence" is, at least for this reader, "hermetically sealed." It does not "speak," as does "Mot," directly to a social or political problem. Neither does it posit a kind of subjectivity. Like many of Césaire's poems, "Présence" is "encrypted" by a lexicon derived in part from the flora and fauna specific to equatorial Africa and the Antilles and by a syntax heavily informed by what Césaire refers to as his Mallarméan side (*mon côté mallarméen*). Its potential therefore does not lie in its referentiality. "Présence" does not allow for an external vantage point. In Derridean terms, "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*." "Présence" seems to refer to nothing outside of itself. What it seems to *present* is a self-contained universe whose potential lies in its self-reflexivity and the extent to which it engages the reader in the act of reading.

Reading is not to be understood here as simply the horizontal activity of following a line of writing or text, however. Recent theories such as Formalism, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Deconstruction have shown reading, as an endless, completely undetermined act, to be extremely problematic. But this problem we shall defer until we take up the critical theories of Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. What I wish to point out here is that "Présence," through its non-referentiality, calls into question the notion that reading generates self-awareness. For if "Présence" generates an awareness of anything, it is the indeterminateness of language itself. "Présence," in its negation of presencing, releases language from the word's bond with things and makes pure poetry and the pure idea its only destination.



As Césaire makes clear in his interview with Jacqueline Leiner and elsewhere in his writings, much of his success as a poet is due to the great influence that French poets like Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, and the surrealists have had upon him. However, as Edward A. Jones recalls in "Afro-French Writers of the 1930s and the Creation of the *Négritude* School," when he met Césaire in 1935, the Martinican poet was also

"deeply immersed in the literature of the Black experience, especially in the United States," and included in his readings the works of Langston Hughes, Claude MacKay, Jean Toomer, and Sterling Brown's *Southern Road*.<sup>47</sup>

What I find curious is that, unlike Senghor who frequently comments on the impact these writers had upon his developing black consciousness, Césaire seems reluctant to discuss his relationship with them. For example, when Jacqueline Leiner asked him to talk about the black American poets in the interview that prefaces the 1978 edition of *Tropiques*, Césaire responds that he and his group had very little contact with them. Apparently, their limited finances prevented them from socializing with the Americans, although they did go out with Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude MacKay, all of whom became their "personal baggage."<sup>48</sup> In this discussion and elsewhere, Césaire stresses the fact that the Afro-American writers played a minor role in his development as a poet and that the guiding key concepts for his aesthetics and his politics were derived primarily from French literature, Nietzschean philosophy, and the ethnography of Leo Frobenius. Nevertheless, in the July 1941 issue of *Tropiques*, Césaire did pay tribute to the black poets in "Introduction à la poésie nègre américaine," which is accompanied by French translations of James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation," Toomer's "Harvest Song," and Claude MacKay's "To America."

It would be difficult to speculate in retrospect on Césaire's reluctance to discuss his relationship with the Afro-American writers he met during the 1930s and 1940s. However, by 1956 when the "First Congress of Black Writers and Artists" was held in Paris, it was clear that there existed a certain degree of animosity between the two groups.<sup>49</sup> This animosity was brought out during a dispute initiated by Richard Wright over where American blacks stood in relation to the African world that Senghor had defined in his presentation to the audience that had packed into the Salle Descartes at the Sorbonne to witness this historic event.

After Senghor's elaborate presentation on "L'Esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture négro-africaine," Richard Wright addressed the gathering in a language laced with irony:

I was stupefied with admiration with what Leopold Senghor said here today, and it is towards his remarks that I want to address myself. . . . It was a brilliant speech and a revelation to me—a brilliance poured out in impeccable, limpid French, about the mentality and sensibility

of the African;—a poetic world, rich, dynamic, moving, tactile, rhythmic. Yet, as I admired it, a sense of uneasiness developed in me. . . . I wonder where do *I*, an American Negro, conditioned by the harsh industrial, abstract force of the Western world that has used stern, political prejudices against the society (which he has so brilliantly elucidated)—where do *I* stand in relation to that culture?<sup>50</sup>

Wright told the audience that everything he has ever written or said had been in deference to that culture, but he implied that blackness was not sufficient for him to accept Africa, which he suspected as having been complicit in its own colonization, as *his* world: "Where do I latch onto this African world? Is it possible for me to find a working and organic relationship with it?"<sup>51</sup> Césaire offered an indirect response to Wright's question in his opening remarks of "Culture and Colonization" by establishing the colonial situation as the common denominator for all blacks, including American blacks whose subject position in a modern racist society could only be understood as a form of colonialism.<sup>52</sup>

According to A. James Arnold, while Césaire's Marxist analysis in "Culture and Colonization" provoked an "explosion of joy" among the other delegates, the Americans were outraged by Césaire's characterization of them as a colonized people.<sup>53</sup> The deeply offended John Davis defended the United States by arguing that every American president from Washington to Dwight Eisenhower had always taken an anticolonialist position.<sup>54</sup> But a cable from Du Bois explaining why he could not be present supported Césaire's contention that American Blacks are similarly colonized, thereby further straining the already tense relationship between the five Americans and the other delegates.

In "Princes and Powers" Baldwin describes the "great stir" caused by Du Bois's cable, which began with "I am not present at your meeting because the U.S. Government will not give me a passport," when it was read to the packed Descartes amphitheater.

The reading was interrupted at this point by great waves of laughter, by no means good-natured, and by a roar of applause, which, as it clearly could not have been intended for the State Department, was intended to express admiration for Du Bois' plain speaking. "*Any American Negro traveling abroad today must either not care about Negroes or say what the State Department wishes him to say.*" This, of course, drew more applause. It also very neatly compromised whatever effectiveness

the five-man American delegation then sitting in the hall might have hoped to have.<sup>55</sup>

But Baldwin's interpretation is not altogether accurate. What Du Bois in fact wrote was that "Any Negro-American who travels abroad today must either not discuss race conditions in the United States or say the sort of thing which our state Department wishes the world to believe."<sup>56</sup> The primary target of Du Bois's attack was not the American delegation,<sup>57</sup> as Baldwin's interpretation of the cable seems to suggest, but rather the United States government's very undemocratic practice of depriving certain of its citizens of their basic civil rights, not the least of which is the right to free speech.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, as Ambroise Kom points out in his discussion of the 1956 Congress, what the message implied was that the American delegates were agents of the Department of State.<sup>59</sup> In any event, Baldwin, echoing Richard Wright, calls into question one of the basic premises of Négritude and its competing epistemologies: that there exists an African life-world common to all black people in the world.

Baldwin writes that after the morning session, when Wright introduced him to the other members of the American delegation, he momentarily found it quite unbelievable (ludicrous, perhaps?) that they were being *defined*, indeed, that they had been brought together by their relation to the African continent, a relationship that for them had yet to be clarified. But as Baldwin was well aware, that relationship could not be made clear until the problem of the question around which the Congress was organized, "What *is* a culture?" was somehow resolved. Baldwin writes that under the most serene circumstances, this would be a difficult question, and that in the context of the conference, it was one that "was helplessly at the mercy of another question: Is it possible to describe as a culture what may simply be, after all, a history of oppression? . . . For what, beyond the fact that all black men at one time or another left Africa, or have remained there, do they really have in common?"<sup>60</sup> However, as the debate went on it became apparent to Baldwin that, despite their "widely dissimilar experiences," what all black people shared was "their unutterable painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men."<sup>61</sup>

But from what, or from where does this image of their own making

derive? Ignoring the cultural context to which the individual black writer owes his identity, Senghor argues that it derives from his African heritage. To support his argument, he discusses what he calls the African tensions and symbols with which Wright's poem "I Have Seen Black Hands" and his autobiography, *Black Boy*, are involved, but about which Wright is unaware.<sup>62</sup> Baldwin finds Senghor's position rather tenuous, however, since in his opinion, *Black Boy* owes its existence to factors that relate specifically to the experiences of a "Negro boy in the Deep South." Baldwin feels that "in so handsomely presenting Wright with his African heritage, Senghor seemed to be taking away his identity" as an American Negro.<sup>63</sup> He explains that he has always thought of *Black Boy* as a major American autobiography, and that although there might be something African in it just as there is "undoubtedly something African in all Negroes," the question of what that something is and how it has survived remains open. Moreover, Baldwin argues, the fact that it was written in the English language further complicates the problem of where the text stands in relation to the African heritage as Senghor defines it.

*Black Boy* had been written in the English language which Americans had inherited from England, that is, if you like, from Greece and Rome; its form, psychology, moral attitude, preoccupations, in short, its cultural validity, were due to forces which had nothing to do with Africa. Or was it simply that we had been rendered unable to recognize Africa in it?—for it seemed that in Senghor's vast re-creation of the world, the footfall of the African would prove to have covered more territory than the footfall of the Roman.<sup>64</sup>

This position brings us back to Wright's question. Constrained as he is by the authority of the Western literary tradition, but invested with what Du Bois calls a "double-consciousness," and which Wright, reiterating Du Bois, refers to as a double vision and an organically born racial identity that stems from one's being a product of Western civilization, or more particularly, the American South, "Where do I [the African-American writer] latch onto this African world?"<sup>65</sup>

This question forces me to ask: how is it possible to recreate, in the English, French, or Spanish languages and through cultural practices modeled on European modes of cultural exchange, this world whose history or "image" has already been repeatedly *dissimulated* through several hundred years of "vivid and bloody" writing? Moreover, how is the similarly constrained critic to render recognizable whatever African elements

inhabit the black text without first establishing a "working and organic relationship" with that world? Is it possible to establish such a relationship through the discursive practices of Négritude or the Black Aesthetic, or for that matter, the "New" Black Criticism of Baker, Gates, and Stepto? Or is Richard Wright correct in implying that in relation to Senghor's African world, the American Negro signifies *the Other*? These questions are no less complex than the one that guided the 1956 Congress of Black Artists and Writers and will be dealt with more fully in chapter 5. What I would like to turn our attention to now is how the themes of double consciousness and of Otherness are developed in Wright's *Black Boy* and in another major American autobiography, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

